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ABSTRACT

In 1996, Fresno City College (California) participated in the American Association of Community Colleges' Exploring America's Communities project, which works to strengthen the teaching and learning of American history, literature, and culture at U.S. community colleges. The college's action plan has four major objectives: establishing an American Studies discipline, forming a faculty committee on "pluralism and identity," changing the curriculum, and ensuring dissemination of the activities focusing on diversity and identity on campus and in the community. A new course on American pluralism was developed and a colloquium on pluralism and its meaning was held. A symposium on the search for common values in the midst of diversity, featuring an essay contest, a panel discussion, and a celebration of multiculturalism, was also conducted. The college's Honors' colloquia included several conversations on the meaning of diversity, ethnic identity, and commonalties of American culture. The major difficulties were in defining the concept of American pluralism and establishing American Studies as a viable program on campus. In group discussions with faculty, students, and the community, most comments have focused on the issues that divide the country, rather than those that unite. Future goals include developing another class focusing on pluralism in the Humanities division, an in-service day to initiate further discussions, a celebration of diversity, and a presentation to the Board of Trustees. (HAA)

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Fresno City College
Exploring America's Communities Progress Report

In: National Conference on American Pluralism and Identity Program Book
(New Orleans, LA, January 18-19, 1997)

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FRESNO CITY COLLEGE
1101 EAST UNIVERSITY AVENUE
FRESNO, CALIFORNIA 93704

1. Fresno City College is located in the agriculturally rich San Joaquin Valley, geographically in the middle of the state of California. Fresno is one of the most ethnically diverse communities in the valley and state with a population of approximately three hundred and fifty thousand inhabitants that range from African American, Armenian, Asian American (Chinese, Japanese, and Southeast Asian), Basque, Latino (most Mexican), American Indian, Punjabi (Sikhs), and various Euroamericans from many ethnic backgrounds.

Established in 1911, the college is the oldest in the state (some of the buildings date back to the 1920's) providing a culturally diverse student body of approximately eighteen thousand with course offerings ranging from transfer classes to four-year institutions to a multitude of technical and vocational programs preparing them for immediate entrance into the local job market. The college's offerings are primarily for credit (about ninety percent of all classes). With a faculty of over three hundred full-time instructors and counselors, the college and its current administration have upheld a tradition of providing guidance and leadership for the community.

II. The college's Action Plan has four major objectives: (1) Establish a discipline called American Studies; (2) Engage the faculty-at-large by forming a committee on "pluralism and identity"; (3) Make changes in the overall curriculum; (4) Insure program dissemination of the activities focusing on diversity and identity on campus and in the community.

III. Thus far, all of our objectives have begun and are on-going. American Pluralism and Identity Committee (APIC) member, Richard A. Valencia, has developed a new course entitled, *"American Pluralism: the Search for Common Ground,"* and this class will be taught in the Spring Semester of 1997. This is the first step in establishing an American Studies program. At the beginning of the Fall Semester, 1996, the Social Science Division held a half-day colloquia on the subject of pluralism and its meaning.

Mr. Gerry Stokle, Division Dean and lead administrator of the project, has suggested to the campus Curriculum Committee that a statement be included encouraging all departments to consider the discussion of American Pluralism and Identity where possible as part

of any new course presented to the committee for approval.

In the spring of 1996, the Social Science Division presented a symposium entitled, "*Growing Together in the Twenty-first Century: The Search for Common Values in the Midst of Our Diversity.*" The activities included an essay contest addressing the topics of pluralism and diversity in our society, a panel discussion by fourteen students representing the various ethnic groups who attend Fresno City College, and a celebration of multiculturalism. This was a very successful program for both students and the community-at-large (this endeavor was the collaboration of Fresno State University, the Fresno Center for Non-violence, and Centro de la Familia in conjunction with the National Endowment for the Humanities project on pluralism and identity).

In an attempt to integrate the discussion of identity and pluralism, the college's Honors' colloquia included several "conversations" on the meaning of diversity, ethnic identity, and commonalities of American culture (to the extent if one exists).

All of the activities are part of the college's commitment to promote the discussion and value of pluralism and identity in the

classroom and in the community. Notwithstanding, these efforts are all in their incipient stages.

IV. The efforts of the APIC have been supported at all levels of the college from students to the Office of the President. No real obstacles have been encountered in terms of a reticence or intransigence on any one's part. The major difficulty will be to establish American Studies as a viable program on campus. This will take the cooperation of many faculty and the logistics may prove to be the most difficult barrier to overcome. However, the committee is enthusiastic and confident that the Action Plan will be completed.

If anything has elicited the most discussion, it would be the very definition of pluralism and the identification of a "common identity" for this society. In group discussions with faculty, students, and community people, what has been the most comment has been the issues that divide this country rather than unite it.

V. At this juncture, the APIC has started all of its goals as stated in the action plan. Another class focusing on pluralism will be developed by faculty in the Humanities Division. The committee is attempting to obtain the services of a nationally-known speaker to make the key

address at an in-service day in the spring to initiate further discussions on pluralism and identity. The college is planning a major celebration of diversity for the spring, and the administration has allocated several thousand dollars for the event. The APIC will work with faculty to integrate sections of courses such as American Literature, American History, and Ethnic Studies into the new American Studies program. Members of the APIC are going to make a presentation to the Board of Trustees in February, 1997 to introduce formally the activities of the APIC and the college on the projects undertaken to promote diversity and pluralism.

VI. As previously stated, one of the more perplexing issues is to attempt to define the concept of pluralism. The term "American" is loaded with an emotional flavor that is difficult to "dilute" when applied to different groups. What is evident is that the term refers more to an ideal than a reality. In attempting to "deconstruct" extant definitions of cultural pluralism and the "melting pot," students and faculty have struggled with any common definition of who we are and what that is supposed to represent. Some of the faculty have suggested that what we are confronting is more the

question of a personal identity that anything else. Students find that the whole concept of a national identity as confusing and ambiguous. They often refer to ideational constructs of Americanism. Some of the more salient comments is that we, as a nation, are more divided by social class more than race, ethnicity, or gender. Notwithstanding, the latter characteristics complicate the vision of what may unite us. In exploring the issue of common ground, the one committee member believed that it was *the hope* of what the United States represents that is the common experience of many Americans. What is abundantly clear is that pluralism, diversity, and multiculturalism are concepts as well as forces that need to be better understood in order for us to prepare our students for the twenty-first century.